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Hayley Bowman

Purdue University, hbowman@purdue.edu

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Through the Lens of Propaganda: the Spanish *Campesina* During the Spanish Civil War

Hayley Bowman

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The use of propaganda images during wartime serves many functions: to mobilize troops, boost morale, and display political agendas. However, such propaganda also reveals much about societal viewpoints, ideals, and assumptions—often articulating abstract notions taken for granted at the time of production. While propaganda cannot be taken as a completely truthful historical source, a careful analysis of propaganda art can help historians understand motivations, audiences, and social norms of the time.¹ By utilizing and analyzing visual material such as propaganda posters, a more complete picture of the structure and mentality of societies emerges that previously did not through written documentation alone, especially of those citizens, such as workers and women, who tend to become lost due to illiteracy and subordination. This method becomes extremely useful in deciphering the political imagery of the Spanish Civil War, revealing changing notions about the roles of women in early twentieth-century Spain that do not exist in formal written documents or memoirs. A propaganda poster painted by the artist Fergui around 1938 provides a prime example of the ways in which political imagery reflect societal conflict, revealing the fractured tendencies of the peninsula on the Republican side of the war in attempts to redefine women's roles in the public sphere, in terms of rural unrest, in the conflicting traditionalism of Spanish society, and in the limitations of social mobility faced by women in Spain during the Second Republic and Spanish Civil War from 1931 to 1939 (Fig. 1).²

A thorough analysis of Fergui's poster begins with an examination of the uses and creation of propaganda during the Spanish Civil War. Due to a "high level of illiteracy," posters became a method of conveying "political information" as well as "the government's... cultural

¹ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 2nd Edition, (SAGE Publications, 1992), 213-214.

² Fergui, *Campesina! Tu Trabajo En El Campo Fortalece El Espiritu De Los Que Combaten*, Lithography, three-color, 100 x 70 cm, ca 1938, George Mason University - Women in World History, <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/240.html>>.

policies” to the country’s undereducated populace.³ Both Nationalists and Republicans created propaganda, but Nationalist leaders relied on “military victory...[as] their greatest political tool,” while Republicans put a greater emphasis on poster art during the war.⁴ In Republican Spain, the role of posters intensified, most likely as a result of the wider variety of political agendas in play and “the greater stress put on sociopolitical propaganda by the left.”⁵ The Republican messages echoed the “tradition of propagandist poster art” dating back to the Russian and French Revolutions, “laud[ing] democracy, equality, and liberty.”⁶ By harkening back to earlier “republican” traditions, the political left attempted to create a visual as well as ideological connection with political movements elsewhere. While Republican propaganda posters attempted to garner support from people from all levels of society to a vast variety of left-wing causes, a unique and striking agenda began to appear in poster art: calls specifically to Spanish women. This attempt to incorporate a previously-unrecognized half of society into the Spanish collective appears especially striking within the context of the extreme divisions of civil war. Although “the cultural representation of women is highly functional to the creation of gender roles and the dissemination of social norms through popular collective imagery,” the mere presence of women at the foreground of war propaganda during this period signifies the turning of attention upon a previously-untapped audience of women.⁷ Fergui’s depiction of the smiling female figure takes center stage to the somewhat deemphasized male silhouette in the background, leaving no doubt as to the intended audience of the piece: the Spanish agrarian peasant woman, or *campesina*.⁸

³ Kathleen M. Vernon, “Gritos de la Pared/Shouts from the Wall.” In *The Spanish Civil War and the Visual Arts*, ed. Kathleen M. Vernon, (Cornell University, 1989), 132

⁴ Frances Lannon, *The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, (Osprey Publishing, 2002), 76

⁵ Vernon, *The Spanish Civil War and the Visual Arts*, 132.

⁶ Lannon, *The Spanish Civil War*, 76.

⁷ Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver: Arden Press, Inc, 1995), 48.

⁸ Fergui, *Campesina!*, ca 1938.

Other contextual clues provided by the image include “the insignia of the *Com[i]té Provincial de Madrid* ([Provincial] Committee based in Madrid) and the *Sección Española de la Comunista Interna[c]ional* (Spanish Section of the Communist International),” as well as the words “*Secretaría Femenina* (Women’s Ministry)” located in the bottom left of the poster.⁹ This establishes the poster as distinctly Republican in nature, emphasized by the presence of communist symbols, and as appealing to the rural population, suggested by the reference to the “*Com[i]té Provincial*.” These small details reveal the political affiliation of the poster’s message and allow the propaganda to act as an analytical tool to better understand the Spanish communist and overall Republican view of women’s roles during the Spanish Civil War.

The rise of Republican ideals during the Second Republic in 1931 “provided women with political and social rights for the first time, thus ending, formally at least, their status as second-class citizens.”¹⁰ Such rights included “los mismos derechos electorales” for “los ciudadanos de uno y otro sexo, mayores de veintitrés años” as well as divorce of marriage “por mutuo disenso o a petición de cualquiera de los cónyuges.”¹¹ The inclusion of such basic rights as suffrage and divorce had an enormous impact on perceptions of women by society and by the women themselves. As a result of such changes, women started to play a larger role in many aspects of society, even “[beginning] to take part in politics”— something unheard of in “traditionalist Spain.”¹² By granting women the vote, Republican Spain set the stage for other societal changes and freedoms. Women began to find new avenues open for exploration in the new Republic, and Fergui’s propaganda commissioned by the Spanish Communist International group reflects the

⁹ Helen M. Greeson, “Gendering the Republic and the Nation: Political Poster Art for the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939” (master’s thesis, Georgia State University, 2012), 57.

¹⁰ Andy Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 12.

¹¹ *Constitución de la República Española* (1931) title III, ch.1, art. 36, ch. 2, art. 43, accessed 17 November 2012, <http://www1.icsi.berkeley.edu/~chema/republica/constitucion.html>.

¹² Raymond Carr, *Modern Spain 1875-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 118.

growing inclusion of women into the workforce. In fact, “women in Republican Spain were rapidly mobilized, with activities ranging from more traditional ones such as procuring of food... to work in factories or running the transportation system,” signifying that women began to aid the war effort by doing the work of *both* sexes.¹³ In the most basic way, the Spanish Republic realized that “the integrations of the female work force into productions” was “an active ingredient in winning the war,” creating a high demand for female workers in jobs previously held by men as a means of increasing wartime production and providing essential equipment and materials for the Republican troops.¹⁴ Women throughout Spain began to find themselves incorporated both politically and economically into the greater Spanish society, despite the fact that the society as a whole remained fractured along Republican and Nationalist lines.

The woman in Fergui’s poster has the specific role as a rural woman, a position reiterated in her more traditional dress, her use of farm equipment, the countryside in the background, and, most obviously, the text proclaiming, “Peasant women! Your work in the fields strengthens the spirits of those in combat!”¹⁵ For this reason, analysis of this propaganda not only examines the changing ideals of women’s roles but also the unique roles that rural Spanish women played during the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish countryside underwent substantial changes during the Second Republic. Republican leaders “attempted to solve the peasant problem” through “Agrarian reform,” which mainly consisted of collectivization.¹⁶ The new Republican government attempted to appease its rural populace by incorporating leftist agrarian policies throughout the Spanish countryside. In fact, in a letter to Republican leadership, Stalin “recommend[ed]... to attract the peasants by settling the agrarian question by reducing taxes” and

¹³ Tabea Alexa Linhard, *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 37

¹⁴ Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 121, 177.

¹⁵ Fergui, *Campesina!*, 1938.

¹⁶ Frank Jellinek, *The Civil War in Spain* (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1969), 38.

promoting collective agriculture.¹⁷ The communist group funding the production of the propaganda poster would have most certainly shared Stalin's view. Unfortunately, the "socialist control of labour exchanges destroyed old relationships in agriculture," causing additional fissures in a country on the brink of civil war— a crucial turning point in creating peasant unrest in the Second Republic and creating a loss of Republican land holdings in rural areas after the outbreak of war.¹⁸ The tendency for communist collectivization initiatives to ultimately alienate the rural population made Republican appeals to women even more crucial as a means of holding on to peasant support as the war progressed.

For women, life in the countryside differed in slight but significant ways from the life of their male counterparts, especially after the beginning of the civil war. These changes and the unique position of rural women helps to explain the critical importance of Fergui's poster. In the years proceeding the war, the percent of women working in agriculture in Spain had dropped dramatically: from "nearly 60 percent... in the early 1900s" to only around 20 percent "by the 1930s" as "approximately 40 percent of working women moved into domestic service" due to industrialization.¹⁹ This means that the target audience of the Republican propaganda was an audience in the middle of a demographic shift, torn between the traditional countryside and more modern urban centers. To complicate matters further, Spain's natural and historic regionalism prevents a "universal model of women's work" from being "applied to all countrywomen," making "meaningful generalization very difficult."²⁰ Because attitudes, traditions, and gendered ideals vary substantially from region to region, a single Spanish rural identity did and does not

¹⁷ Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), 324.

¹⁸ Carr, *Modern Spain*, 118.

¹⁹ Shirley Mangini, *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4.

²⁰ Timothy Rees, "Women on the Land: Household and Work in the Southern Countryside, 1875-1939," in *Constructing Spanish Womanhood: Female Identity in Modern Spain*, eds. Victoria Lorée Enders and Pamela Beth Radcliff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 173-174

exist for peasant men or peasant women in Spain during any time period. Although Spain's regional diversity makes a complete analysis of the status and mindset of rural women during the Second Spanish Republic and Spanish Civil War impossible, the fact remains that "the slow but steady inclusion of women in the urban labour market in both industry and services had already begun to lay the material basis for undermining... traditional role[s], although in rural areas these changes were less marked."²¹

This absence of such changes derives, in part, from the extensive sharing of agricultural tasks between sexes already present before the outbreak of war. In a world where "substituting for one another in agricultural labor where necessary," it was not uncommon for "either or both sexes [to] routinely perfor[m] a wide range of tasks: weeding, breaking clods, preparing seed beds, sowing, threshing" and so on by the late nineteenth century.²² However, a gendered division of labor still existed in agrarian Spain. Despite sharing an overwhelming majority of tasks with peasant women, peasant "men undert[ook] tasks seen as most important," notably ploughing, "regarded as the exclusive domain of men."²³ Therefore, the only substantial change in agricultural labor for the *campesina* addressed by Fergui in his poster would have been the inclusion of traditionally-male tasks such as ploughing into the already-crowded agricultural workload. This contrasts heavily with labor in urban areas, where "women's participation in the struggle... 'opened up significant mold-breaking possibilities and spaces for women's direct action and initiatives'" and consequently causes a slightly wider shift in attitude than in the more remote countryside.²⁴ However, as the presence of the propaganda poster targeting peasant women shows, despite the lack of a complete overhaul of traditional ideals in agrarian Spain, the

²¹ Durgan, *The Spanish Civil War*, 12.

²² Rees, "Women on the Land," *Constructing Spanish Womanhood*, 182.

²³ Rees, "Women on the Land," *Constructing Spanish Womanhood*, 182.

²⁴ Linhard, *Fearless Women*, 37.

mentality of the Republican left did encourage all women, urban and rural, to play an essential role in the defense and support of the Spanish Republic during the civil war.

While Fergui's poster does empower the *campesina* audience to join in the war effort in a very active way by taking over the work of husbands, brothers, and sons in the field, the communist commissioners very clearly saw such work in a very specific context: as wartime support. Especially as the civil war drug on, "women's role was seen a strictly 'complementary'" to the overarching role of men on the battlefields.²⁵ The poster echoes this idea, suggesting that the role of women in the fields supports male soldiers by bolstering "el espíritu de los que combaten:" the men.²⁶ The same Republicans that had proclaimed political and social rights for women in the name of the Second Republic in 1931 began to tone down the more feminist-leaning rhetoric in favor of a more right-wing stance on women's roles. In fact, "even members of [the] seemingly most radical group," the anarchists, "moderated their slogans during the process of war, returning to a much more traditional understanding of women's roles and emphasizing motherhood and women's qualities as nurturers."²⁷ With even the most leftist groups such as the anarchists and, as seen in Fergui's poster, the communists, emphasizing the more traditional position of women as supporters of men, the potential of the Spanish Civil War as a means of achieving serious and long-lasting victories for feminist issues was not a viable outcome. As "the predominant slogan of the time" became "'Men to the Front, Women to the Homefront,'" the "war rhetoric and war imagery through the cultural representation of the 'Homefront Heroine' insisted on a clearly differentiated gender dedication to the war effort" in Republican Spain.²⁸

²⁵ David Mitchell, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), 113.

²⁶ Fergui, *Campesina!*, ca 1938.

²⁷ Linhard, *Fearless Women*, 39

²⁸ Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 54

The predominance of the view of women's work during the civil war as "supportive" of men's efforts rather than as of equal value to the work being done on the battlefield or, most tellingly, even as of equal value to the identical work of the men before the war, becomes even more apparent in the countryside. Most likely due to the relative resilience of traditional ideals in Republican rural areas, *campesinas* became described as helpers and supporters rather than autonomous workers. Simply, "men had an occupational identity while women's work in agriculture and husbandry was described as *ayuda familiar* (family help)," a description that dismisses the previous moves to open up new opportunities for women during the conflict.²⁹ Despite the sense of the importance of women's work that Fergui's poster generates by placing the woman at the center of the image, her traditional attire of a dress and head covering with an apron serve as a subtle reminder that the woman pictured may be doing the work of a man, but she still remains very much a feminine figure.³⁰ This visual representation reminds the audience that the woman's "work is not her own; she continues to support men" as "her work remains domestic production in the provincial, pre-industrial private sphere" of the Spanish countryside.³¹

The emphasis on the "supportive" nature of women's wartime production highlights the limitations of widespread and lasting change in the gender system of Spain throughout the Second Republic and Spanish Civil War. However, the term "limitations" does not imply that women did not acquire *any* social or political achievement in Republican Spain. In fact, "the concession of rights in [politics, labor, and family], together with educational reform, was an important step toward securing the social and political advancement of women," despite only

²⁹ Rees, "Women on the Land," *Constructing Spanish Womanhood*, 186.

³⁰ Fergui, *Campesina!*, ca 1938.

³¹ Greeson, "Gendering the Republic", 57.

being the starting point for women's rights in Spain.³² The Republican tendency to emphasize traditional women's roles simply acted as a means of slowing women's entrance into society on equal footing with men. Even though women had more than proven themselves in new occupations during the conflict, when the war ended "occupational segregation, wage discrimination, and the traditional opposition to female wage labor continued... due to the weight of cultural gender norms," causing "only a small number of women" to "[take] advantage of their political rights to challenge the male monopoly in politics" and society.³³ This trend only became emphasized due to Spanish regionalism. Just as generalizations about rural women fall victim to exceptions due to the regionalistic fissures of the peninsula, so did the opportunity for real and lasting gains for women's rights in Spain. Because the "breakdown [in the traditional confinement of women to the home] did not occur through all of republican Spain, and there were sharp differences in the patterns of female mobilization and protagonism among the different regions," gains in women's rights only happened sporadically and therefore held no clout in the bigger picture.³⁴ In such a traditionalist culture, substantial progress for women's status and position that carried beyond wartime would have required a strong and unified force with a clear mission—something obviously impossible to women integrated into a society as fractured as Spain and in the middle of a civil war.

However, despite drawbacks stemming from factors such as Spanish regionalism and traditionalism, "the fact that [Spanish women's] heightened consciousness was for the most part not overtly expressed during the Spanish Civil War does not mean that it did not exist."³⁵ True, the women of Spain "were stripped of any notions of feminist consciousness" at the end of the

³² Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 47.

³³ Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 47-48.

³⁴ Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 49.

³⁵ Linhard, *Fearless Women*, 37.

war, suggesting that “Spanish women in the war apparently had a circular evolution: from repression to relative freedom and back to repression,” but posters such as the communist propaganda painted by Fergui offer insight into another conclusion.³⁶ The simple fact that the poster focused on and targeted women as an audience suggests that the mindset of the original Second Republic still held some sway even as far into the war as 1938. Even though “revolutionary/war imagery cannot be viewed as a direct reflection of reality, it may point to readjustments in patterns of social behavior and the representation of gender roles,” and such ideas remain long after such posters cease to act as “gritos de la pared” during times of war.³⁷

The impact of propaganda on the morale of populations during wartime is easily understood and remains crucial even to modern war efforts. However, the deeper cultural and social messages that such images send remains often overlooked and can function as a tool for the analysis of society at large, as seen in this example of a Spanish communist poster from the Spanish Civil War. The poster’s symbolic incorporation of women into the fractured nation of Spain represented the juxtaposition of both unity in terms of sex as well as fissures along political and geographic lines in a way that represents the constant struggles for unification in Spanish history. Utilizing only three colors and a simple image, Fergui’s poster exemplifies the fissures in Republican Spain as women’s roles became redefined, rural unrest caused structural instability, traditional Spain fought back, and limitations to women’s rights success crystalized after the conclusion of the war—all in a rectangle only one hundred centimeters tall by seventy centimeters wide³⁸.

³⁶ Mangini, *Memories of Resistance*, 79-80.

³⁷ Vernon, *The Spanish Civil War and the Visual Arts*, 132.

³⁸ Greeson, “Gendering the Republic,” 57.



Figures

Figure 1: "Peasant woman! Your work in the fields strengthens the spirits of those in combat!"

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